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ABSTRACT

A magazine writer and university instructor used interview samples, editors' comments, and other materials from his own article-then-in-progress for the "New York Times Magazine" in a university-level class in magazine writing. Students, who were creating their own in-depth magazine articles, could see the same principles and techniques discussed in class in relation to their work applied at a professional level. This improved understanding and motivation and clarified the relevance of the course's rigorous expectations. By examining the instructor's magazine article as it evolved, classroom discussion stressed the writing process, reflecting reported trends in composition education and similar approaches reported in journalism education. The instructor's experiences provide a framework and encouragement for other teachers to bring more of themselves and their work into the classroom. (Author/RS)

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"Preaching Our Practice: On Sharing Professional Work With Magazine Students"

--AEJMC Convention 1992
Magazine Division--

Abstract

This paper describes my classroom use of interview samples, editors' comments, and other materials from my own article-then-in-progress for *The New York Times Magazine*. Students, who were creating their own in-depth magazine articles, could see the same principles and techniques we had discussed in relation to their work applied on a professional level. This improved understanding and motivation and clarified the relevance of the course's rigorous expectations. By examining my magazine article as it evolved, classroom discussion stressed writing *process*, reflecting reported trends in composition education and similar approaches reported in journalism education. The paper provides a framework and encouragement for teachers to bring more of themselves and their work into the classroom.

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"Preaching Our Practice: On Sharing Professional Work With Magazine Students"

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Many an undergraduate's expectations of magazine writing are shaped by those genres to which the student has had the greatest exposure: how-to or first-person accounts in teen magazines, record reviews and interviews in music magazines, beauty and fashion nuggets in *GQ* and *Vogue*. Often these specimens of magazine writing are marketed in such a flashy, chatty format, that the aspiring writer may conclude that magazine writing is a breeze.

A university-level class in magazine writing, and especially one in advanced magazine writing, if it is to broaden the students' vision of the craft's possibilities, should take them beyond the more lightweight modes of magazine expression. Many of my advanced students at Drake University in spring 1991 were a bit anxious when I asked them to create a 4,500-word article that included reporting from a variety of written and oral sources, that shaped and selected weeks worth of gathered material into a cohesive form, that had a sense of movement and climax without degrading the integrity of the reporting, and that achieved a style and quality of language worthy of holding a sophisticated reader's attention for a half hour. This sort of task is not for the timid. It is difficult for students to sustain the kind of driving passion required to *finish* such a project in a classroom setting. And it is difficult for teachers (not to mention unreasonable) to demand of students that, as part of their reporting, they interview at least ten sources and then use only the best ten-to-fifteen percent of that material, if it is suspected, even for a second, that the teacher would be unwilling to do the same.[1]

For this reason, the timing of a profile I was writing for *The New York Times Magazine*,[2] was propitious. During my visiting appointment at Drake during the 1990-1991 year, I was revising this profile, adding to and re-examining my reporting materials, and negotiating with editors. In class,

I could not only tell my students about the hard work involved in attempting to create a magazine piece of quality, I could show them. This process was not a display of egotism; and there were enough self-deprecating lessons worth sharing to insure it wouldn't be. (Also there was the ever-present risk that, until it was at last published, the entire piece could have been killed by the *Times*, which in itself would have offered its own valuable, if painful, lessons.) Rather, the process was an attempt to improve understanding and motivation, as well as clarify the relevance of the course's rigorous expectations.

Journalist-teachers have plenty of lessons to share from their own clips. In *Writing for Story*,[3] for example, Jon Franklin annotates two of his articles in detail to explain some of the many journalistic choices made in their creation. This paper focuses on how I incorporated my own annotated work and my own behind-the-scenes stories in a classroom setting and provides a framework and encouragement for teachers to bring more of themselves and their work into the classroom.

In our discussions of my ongoing project, students and I were able to handle bundles of notes, files, and discards that formed a still warm and changing trail of the writing process and the author's own education. This emphasis on process reflects reported trends in composition education and similar approaches reported in journalism education.[4] Students could see the same principles and techniques we often discussed in relation to their own researching, interviewing, organizing, writing, and revising applied on a professional level. They were given something to shoot for, I was kept in touch with the demands the course was making, and greater empathy was attained all around.

On three or four occasions during the academic year, I would bring materials to class from the article I was writing: a 4,000 word profile on controversial film maker John Waters. Early in the spring semester, when the advanced class was, in accordance with our syllabus, feverishly engaged in research, casting about for angles, questions, follow-up questions, anecdotes, kernels of narrative, I lugged in a stack of files containing my own research. Before passing the folders around, I spent some time discussing their organization.

First came the clippings: a folder of reviews of the director's work, a folder of previous major profiles about him, smaller articles about him, some pieces written by him, a separate folder on an obscenity case out of Florida that interested me as a timely peg--perhaps a hundred clippings in all, about half of which had been provided to me by the *Times*, the other half I had collected. My students, who had been asked to dig up a number of clippings pertaining to their own subjects and to discuss their relevance, could see, by looking through the folders I had brought, the circled passages

that had interested me and the questions those passages sometimes inspired, jotted in the margins and then organized in computer files.

Weeks in advance of my in-depth interviews in Baltimore--I explained, taking them through the files--I had been cultivating and organizing questions. Whenever I would conduct a preliminary phone interview with any of a dozen co-workers, friends, and relatives of Mr. Waters's, I would learn of new anecdotes, new themes, new ideas--and the questions that these inspired I would tuck away in a separate file to ask Mr. Waters himself. This list of questions spanned eight single-spaced printed pages, subdivided into categories of "family and childhood," "religion," "friendship and love," "making movies," and "general."

That I rarely referred to the actual list of questions during my eight hours of interview time with Mr. Waters undoubtedly struck some of my students as ironic and imprudent. But, as I tried to explain in class, I'd become fairly familiar with the list before the interviews began, and after my first four-hour interview was over, I consulted the list to note what had been covered, what had not, and what new ideas deserved to be added, before returning for the second four-hour interview, during which the list was again only minimally consulted. And yet, we ended up covering virtually all of the questions on it, and a good deal more. In my interviews I had wanted the security and knowledge that one derives from preparation as well as the relaxed, encouraging atmosphere that comes with spontaneity, or at least the illusion of spontaneity.[5] This combination requires even greater preparation; so went the thrust of my classroom argument, and being able to pass around the actual lists lent it an added measure of credibility.

Great classroom emphasis was placed on being able to observe one's subject in natural surroundings--ideally, interacting with other people--so that the interviewer learns what the subject is like outside of the potentially inhibiting interview process. I asked Mr. Waters on several occasions what he had planned to do during the week I'd be in town, and he suggested that he throw one of his traditional summer barbecues for his long-time friends and co-workers. The barbecue scene became an anchor for the piece, as it was useful narratively and thematically. Class time was spent discussing the various ways to cover such an event, ground rules about quoting participants, and the ethical considerations in arranging such an event so as to avoid creating scenes that have more to do with the reporter's imagination than the reality of the subject.

Even a reporter's most carefully considered plans fall flat--as evidence I could produce the morning wasted driving around with a one of Waters's childhood friends as she tried to point out for me various sights of their teenage misbehavior. The results, which were deadly dull, were not all her fault. After all, I had asked for the tour. The important lesson for students, however, was to have a few potential narrative scenes in mind as backups.

And when their own scenes sometimes fell through, they knew they could count on their instructor's commiseration (even as I insisted they get back out there).

I was amazed at how resourceful these students were at arranging and reporting narrative scenes: one student, in fact, spent at least a half dozen afternoons and evenings visiting and interviewing the residents of a half-way house for recovering women alcoholics, observing her subjects as they shared meals, as they listened to a guest speaker, as they joked with and confided in one other.

Our classroom discussions about the John Waters piece, this student remarked after the semester was over, "taught me not to think so rigidly about interview settings."[6]

On two occasions I played taped interview excerpts for my students. The first was from a phone interview with one of Waters's producers, Brian Grazer, who was discussing how the overweight protagonist of Waters's movie *Hairspray* charmed him and what a surprise this was, because, as he put it, "I pretty much only like attractive people." Concerned that he would sound superficial, he immediately followed this revealing pronouncement, which had said as much about Hollywood in general as it had about him specifically, with three of the most common and dreaded words that sources say to reporters: "Don't write that."

While not involving Hollywood producers, similar situations had rankled most of the students in class at some point in their young careers. Listening to the taped excerpt related to class discussions about what a reporter's options might be under such circumstances: refuse and possibly alienate the source, strike some deal of anonymity, roll over, to name several possibilities, and we'd ranked their order of preference to the reporter and to the source. We also examined the option I had exercised on tape: While stumbling for the right words, I was able to convince Mr. Grazer that it was an important quote (which I truly believed, and which I ended up using). Our little dance went like this:

> **Source:** "I pretty much only like attractive people. */Laughing/* That's terrible to say."
> **Reporter:** "Well, hey, it's an honest thing to say."
> **Source:** "You know, I mean */pause/* don't write that. That's just so superficial."
> **Reporter:** "Well, it's not necessarily superficial, if ah, put in the context of how--"
> **Source:** "All right."
> **Reporter:** "Of how, ah, you know--it means something."
> **Source:** "Yeah, it means something..."

That the professional reporter was, in this case, fumbling for the right

words proved as valuable a lesson as the exchange's happy resolution, because it demonstrated for students that their anxiety, their difficulty with such situations, is normal and shared by people with much more experience, and that it need not undermine the final product. A colleague at mine at The University of Iowa once told me that teachers sometimes should play the role of the fool. And although I admit to being perplexed by his meaning at the time, it became clear to me as students and I laughed together at my crudely phrased: "Of how, ah, you know--it means something."

Students were also privy to some of the awkward pauses, the searching for words, and the reporter's twice and thrice asked questions, as he tenaciously, and at times obnoxiously, returned to topics that he believed might serve some thematic instinct of his, if only the source would cooperate with the right answers. One point on the tapes I enjoyed sharing was an excruciatingly long silence between my subject's less-than-complete answer and my own follow-up question. Many student reporters, when faced with the prospect of an awkward silence, would move on to the next question on their list and forget about the train of thought that had proved so difficult. When the interviewer does this, of course, he or she has lost control of the interview and is merely taking dictation. The lesson in those long seconds of silence is this: don't be afraid of it, you can edit it out later. Just gather your thoughts and consider your response. When it comes to their experience with *hearing* interviews, students are perhaps most used to the broadcast variety; and by those standards, the fumbling print-reporter's research interviews must sound horribly unprofessional. So getting used a new type of sound is valuable.

Learning about these kinds of interviewing problems and issues can be sterile on the textbook page and tend to loom larger than life when they crop up in the student reporter's actual experience. We could examine them effectively on my interview tapes--a context that offered immediacy without being threatening.

Culling and organizing material seems to be the most difficult process for even advanced magazine-writing students to grasp and master. Because the elements of a coherent magazine feature story should conform, however subtly, to some theme or structure, without degrading the accuracy and fairness of the reporting, far more information must be gathered than is ultimately used. I think it fair to say that the average undergraduate journalism major has trouble conceiving the amount of labor involved in such a process on the professional level. But a clear picture of this is necessary if one is to aspire to it. The process was made graphically clear, quantitatively if not qualitatively, by comparing partial transcripts (more than 20,000 words from just Mr. Waters's interviews) with my first draft

(7,000 words) and again with my second draft (5,000 words).[7]

Two important lessons were potentially derived from this: a) there exist vast amounts of material that, while being somewhat interesting, are ultimately not interesting or pertinent *enough*, and b) quotations must be carefully selected, or interpreted in paraphrase, rather than transcribed at great length into the article. (Predictably enough, much student magazine-writing turns control of the story over to the subject's long, unfocused quotes.) In this case, students could see for themselves how entire pages of amusing, engaging quotations were completely left out, and, elsewhere, how rambling anecdotes that required many paragraphs of conversation to elicit all the important details had been boiled down to a brief recreated scene.[8]

(With other magazine articles of mine, I've distributed copies of my first and second full drafts, marked as vividly as possible to show the great copy migrations: scenes and issues moved from after a forced transition to a place in the story where they fit more organically; catchy anecdotal material that didn't really serve a larger purpose and so was cut; bursts of inspiration that evolved into more coherent passages after much experimentation and examination--all changes that graphically represent the vital lesson that just because one has written something, doesn't mean it's ready to be published.)

Finally, students were surprised at the amount of time I spent on the phone refining the story with my editor. That March, I spent more than a dozen hours so engaged, including a fair chunk of time discussing the Florida obscenity case which, as less-than-ideal luck would have it, was scheduled to go to trial a week before we were scheduled to publish, yet too late for us to make changes to the story. Had the reporter been a little more on the ball, went the slightly embarrassing theme of this lesson, the article might have had a better peg. As things stood, we engaged in an impromptu discussion on "finessing it."

When considering my dealings with the *Magazine*'s editors, students seemed particularly intrigued by the notion that I was answering to someone, to *someones*, in fact, in much the same way that the students were expected to answer to me. How copious were the revisions their teacher was asked to make! How he had squirmed upon hearing one editor's reaction to his first draft, the free-lancer's nightmare: "Why are we writing about this guy?!"

One student remarked after the semester's end that she especially enjoyed learning about the "frustrations of working with editors--making new changes for different editors, having editors change things for you that you had been happy with."[9]

Able to see me in their shoes, my students learned that we were in this process of magazine writing together.[10]

Certainly the most enjoyable aspect of magazine writing that I was able to share in the classroom was the thrill of publication. Lab magazines can provide students with some motivation, and Drake has a couple of fine ones, but many magazine students are lured into this field by the promise of publication in high profile consumer titles. The prominent by-line, the colorful photos (no doubt shot and printed over the course of a weekend, for more money than any writer would get) and the mouth-watering, albeit abstract, concept of the Sunday *Times*' 1.6 million circulation, were a handy reminder of the potential rewards of such hard labor.

Some disillusionment, however, had set in, as well. As my students watched me age three years in our nine months together, at least one of them came to the conclusion that it was not worth it. On the other hand, I can name one other who was inspired to buy a copy of Norman Sims's *The Literary Journalists* for summer pleasure reading.

And there was inspiration evident in the work that the class wrote that semester--a fringe benefit from the land of *product*: more than half of my students wrote stories that were great.

[1] "To maintain credibility with students," among other reasons, Brigham Young Associate Professor Alf Pratte has served as a stringer for local daily newspapers. "I find it difficult to preach what I don't practice on a regular basis.... Rather than relying on textbooks...I can refer to speeches or meetings I attended the same day or day before." "Teacher Benefits as a Part-Time Correspondent." *Journalism Educator* 42:3 (1987) 25-26.

[2] "Kinkmeister: Film maker John Waters is living proof that nothing exceeds like excess." *The New York Times Magazine* 7 April 1991: 34-38, 52.

[3] Franklin, Jon. *Writing for Story*. New York: Atheneum, 1986.

[4] Olson, Lyle. "Recent Composition Research is Relevant to Newswriting." *Journalism Educator* 42:3 (1987) 14-18.

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[5] On the other hand, Janet Malcolm, in *The Journalist and the Murderer*, compares her interviews with *Fatal Vision* author Joe McGinniss and convict Jeffrey MacDonald to those conducted by *Newsday* reporter Bob Keeler, and found the results surprisingly similar. "It hadn't made the slightest difference that Keeler had read from a list of prepared questions and I had acted as if I were passing the time of day."

[6] Ken Metzler, in *Creative Interviewing*, further discusses the art of "showing" the subject of a personality piece in action, and he in turn tips his hat to one of the pioneering masters of the technique, Lillian Ross. Her 1960 *New Yorker* article "The Yellow Bus," in which she glues herself to the Bean Blossom Township High School senior class on their trip to New York, is one of my favorite examples of narrative reporting, and one that has proved accessible and interesting to my magazine writing students.

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[7] "In talking to the best reporters, we find that only about 5 percent of their notes eventually appear in the story in some form," write Roy Peter Clark and Don Fry in *Coaching Writers: Editors and Reporters Working Together*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. As part of taking readers through his process of writing a speech story (60-76), Fry shares his actual notes, providing some visual lessons on notation and organization.

[8] A striking example of narrative effectively recreated from interviews and other sources would be Ramsey Flynn's National Magazine Award-winning overview of the fatal Amtrak crash in Chase, Maryland, "On the Wrong Track," *Baltimore Magazine*, November 1987: 76-93, 124-131.

[9] In other words, all the usual writer-editor stuff. Actually, I would have to say that most of the *Times*' input on this piece was very much appreciated.

[10] "Turnabout can be not only fair play but also invigorating education," concludes John Palen in "Teacher as Writer Highlights Writing, Interviewing Skills." *Journalism Educator* 42:1 (1987) 58-59. Palen describes how he interviews a student in class, writes a 750-word feature on the interview, and then takes his class through the process he used.